

SIR HENRY BESSEMER - INVENTOR OF PERFINs!!

By Maurice Harp.

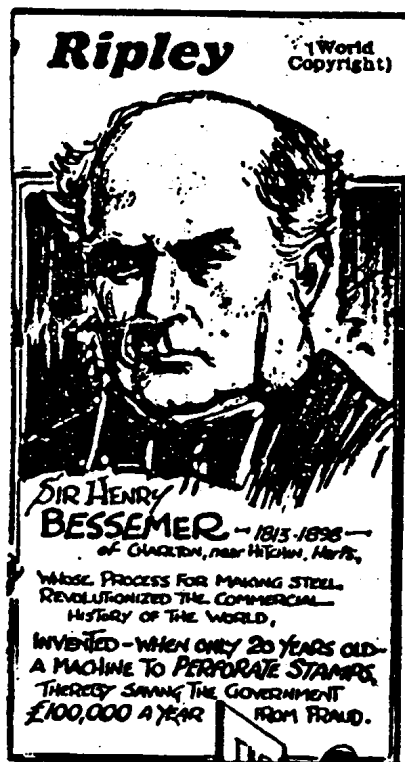
Whilst sorting through articles in the library when I took it over I came across a newspaper cutting taken from the Sunday Express back in 1945 stating that Sir Henry Bessemer invented a machine to perforate stamps to avoid fraud in 1833. A second follow-up article indicated that his proposal was for the perforation of dates on stamps affixed to deeds. To say the least I was surprised as although I knew the names of Archer and Sloper in the story of perforations, Bessemer was new to me and 1833 predated Archer's work by 20 years and Sloper's by over 30 years. Having no further information I assumed that there must be a mistake somewhere and filed away the story in the back of my mind. Now I have the full story and Sir Henry Bessemer was indeed the inventor of perfin's - well almost anyway.

The story begins with the earliest stamps of Great Britain - Revenues. Stamp duties on legal documents were adopted in England in 1694 to raise revenues for war and embossed stamps were introduced to show payment of these. As with postage stamps some 150 years later the government was preoccupied with the possibility of fraud and forgery as the face value of revenue stamps can be extremely high. This fear was later realised and by the early 19th century fraudulent reuse of embossed stamps had become a serious problem. So the stage was set for the entry of young Henry Bessemer.

During our school days we were all taught (and most of us forgot) that Henry Bessemer was the British inventor who invented the process for making steel by blasting compressed air through molten iron - a major step during the industrial revolution. During his lifetime he patented over 100 inventions and in the typical Victorian mould his inventions spread over many areas. In 1832 when he was still only 19 he suggested to the Board of Stamps, who were responsible for revenue stamp production, a possible solution for preventing stamp fraud. As was highlighted before revenue stamps were embossed - Bessemer's suggestion was that the stamps should be perforated instead of being embossed and that they could then be over embossed with the date at the time of usage.

The Board were delighted with the suggestion and not only accepted the suggestion but actually offered the young Bessemer the job of supervising the implementation of his plan. Bessemer was delighted as he needed a good steady job as he wanted to marry. But when he told his fiancée about his news she came up with a suggestion of her own. Her suggestion was that the embossed stamps should incorporate the date directly with removable date plugs and that this should make forgery even harder. Bessemer wasted no time in telling his future employers about this idea which they decided was better than his idea to perforate and decided to adopt it. Unfortunately they also decided that this scheme would be easy to implement and that they would no longer require Bessemer's services. To add insult to injury neither he nor his fiancée received anything for their ideas. Thus instead of perfins being born on revenue stamps in the 1830's, collectors had to wait for 35 years for Sloper to use a similar idea on postage stamps.

For those of us who like a happy ending to a story we do have one here. Bessemer went on to invent his steel making process and became a famous man. The story of him being wronged by the Board of Stamps came to the notice of Disraeli and as a result Bessemer received a knighthood as some recompense for the injustice.



Photocopies of the two
items taken from
The Sunday Express.

The first was on
Jan 7th 1945

The second on
Jan 14th 1945.

Both reduced
in size.

Sir Henry Bessemer
RIPLEY states that Sir Henry Bessemer, born in 1813, at the age of 20 "invented a machine to perforate stamps, thereby saving the Government £100,000 a year." As the first postage stamp was not issued till May 6, 1840, and the Government's trial perforations did not take place till 1853 (vide Stanley Gibbons's "Stamps of the British Empire"), how does Ripley account for the period 1833-53? A. Cecil Fenn.
Endwood Drive,
Little Aston Park,
Sutton Coldfield.
NOTE: Dictionary of National Biography states: "In 1833 frauds on the Government (involving a loss to the revenue of £100,000 a year) were perpetrated by the repeated use of stamps affixed to deeds, etc. These frauds Bessemer rendered impossible by the invention of perforated dies, so that a date could be indelibly impressed on every stamp. His gift of this invention to the Government was to have been recognised by a permanent official appointment, but the promise was not kept, although it was recognised years later by the tardy bestowal of a knighthood."

MEMBERS' COMMENTS ON PREVIOUS ARTICLES

SIR HENRY BESSEMER Bulletin 274 Pg.6-7.

By Rosemary Smith.

I, like 99% of members, had never heard of Bessemer in any other connection except the "Bessemer Steel Converter" until I read Maurice's article.

By coincidence, on the 23rd February at Sheffield P.S. we were shown a display of G.B. Revenues. The speaker was Mr. G. Hardy from Matlock and his closing anecdote, saved until the last as it was a link with Sheffield and the making of steel, was this story of Bessemer and his ideas for making embossed Revenue Stamps safe from forgery. However Mr. Hardy did not make any mention of a link with perfin but presumably this invention of Bessemer's is well known in 'Revenue' collecting circles.